

[Based on a talk delivered at the SFU 2018 conference “Antonio Gramsci: A Legacy for the Future?”]

## **Absolute Historicism in Gramsci, Lukács and Marx**

Andrew Feenberg

**Abstract:** Gramsci and Lukács argue for an integrally historicist ontology which encompasses nature and natural science as well as society. They attempt to save the concepts of truth and reality without assuming a thing in itself wholly independent of history and therefore of human being. On this basis they reject both scientific naturalism and skeptical relativism. There is a precedent for their position in Marx’s early writings, as interpreted by Marcuse. This “finite horizon” of being is shared with very different thinkers such as Latour, Heidegger and Nietzsche.

### ***Introduction: Latour’s Dilemma***

This paper discusses ideas on the nature of truth and reality entertained by Marx and by certain Marxist philosophers in the period between the two world wars. A few years ago, one might have dismissed such issues as purely academic, fodder for the debates of earnest graduate students and their professors. But today these issues are all too relevant. As the “science wars” were relayed by controversies over “fake news,” truth and reality have moved to the front page and are now discussed by the most fashionable thinkers.

The breakdown of faith in natural science is particularly worrisome as climate change demands actions predicated on models and projections. Some blame Thomas Kuhn and post-modernism for this state of affairs. Indeed, a whole new discipline, Science and Technology Studies (STS), now treats science as just another social institution. Gramsci and Lukács anticipated this approach in its broad outlines without challenging the validity of scientific research. Before I turn to a consideration of their thought, I want to show how one contemporary STS scholar addresses the issues that concerned them long ago.

In 2004 Vice President Cheney told a critic of the war in Iraq that he, the critic, belonged to “what we call the reality-based community,” which Cheney defined as “people who believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” He went on, “That’s not the way the world really works anymore, we’re an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality.”<sup>1</sup> You might consider this the origin of “alternative facts” although Cheney intended to create them rather than blather about them on television. We are living with the consequences daily now. Bush may have failed to create his own reality in Iraq but he certainly made a mess of what we use for reality in the United States and increasingly throughout the world.

When Bruno Latour learned of this incident, he felt targeted. After all, as a founding member of STS was he not a constructivist who denied that reality is “out there,” independent of human beings? Had he not defined nature as what the victorious actors in scientific controversies proclaimed it to be? Was he not responsible for the post-modern rejection of truth? If the most powerful actor, the United States government, now claims the power to define reality, who is Latour to complain?

Latour responded to such accusations in a little article called “The Emperor’s Brand

---

<sup>1</sup> Bob Herbert, “For Bush, real life just gets in the way” in *International Herald Tribune*, 23-10-04.

New Clothes.”<sup>2</sup> He imagined a dialogue in which a “modernist” defends the traditional notion of truth and blames constructivism for Bush. The modernist discounts the role of society in knowledge in order to postulate a timeless reality of things in themselves known by a pure rational subject. Latour objects that he is neither on the Left nor the Right, and has never supported Bush. The modernist replies that he has given weapons to his enemies by subverting the distinction between might and right. If reality is simply what people end up believing, then those with power can create it. The emperor may be naked but there is no reason to listen to the little boy who naively says so.

I won't take you through the details of Latour's attempt to defend himself but a brief sketch is instructive. He tries to avoid dogmatic scientism, the view that science is the ultimate and only repository of truth, while also saving the concept of truth from a skeptical or post-modern relativism that would fail to distinguish between science and politics. Common sense wavers between these two positions. To sum up the dilemma, science is either ontology (scientism) or ideology (constructivism).

Scientism implies a contrast between scientific knowledge, which gets at the truth of reality, and culture, which is relative to social circumstances and natural causes such as evolution or brain structure. Science is objective and culture is relative, a local construction. Constructivists are accused of pursuing relativism to its logical conclusion by incorporating science itself into culture. Skeptical relativism dismisses the truth claims of science and treats it as an ordinary social phenomenon, which in some sense it obviously is.

This view is often attributed to Foucault who said, “Truth is a thing of this world.”<sup>3</sup> But Foucault was actually rather cautious. He confined his critique of science to disciplines such as psychiatry and criminology. He did not concern himself with the validity of these dubious sciences, still less with natural science. He argued that they require specific material conditions and powers which have consequences for their human objects. Knowledge is itself a kind of action when subject and object are both human.

Latour goes further; like the constructivists, he extends the analysis to the natural sciences. This places him squarely in the dilemma addressed in his imaginary dialogue: nature is either “out there” independent of human beings or it is created through human action. Latour's privileged example is the “creation” of microbes. Either Pasteur's lactic acid ferment, yeast, existed before he discovered it or his discovery created it. Latour affirms the dependence of the phenomena on their discovery. But he insists that despite its worldly character science has a valid claim to knowledge.

According to Latour, the way to avoid relativism is not to pound on the table and exclaim “I refute it thus,” but to treat things as legitimate members of an extended idea of society. Nature and society form a constantly interacting whole, a multiplicity of networks, rather than two separate substances. The sharp distinction between them that characterizes modern thought since Descartes must be overcome by analysis of the actual complexity of their interactions. Once things enter the network, they too have a history. “My solution,” he writes, “is to historicize more, not less.”<sup>4</sup> The discovery of the lactic

---

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Latour, “The Emperor's Brand New Clothes,” *Domus*, 1-2005.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. C. Gordon, trans. C. Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 169.

acid ferment was an event in its existence as well as ours. Reality is not, it becomes.

### ***Gramsci's Absolute Historicism***

Latour's distaste for Marxism is well known, but surprisingly his "solution" was anticipated by Gramsci and Lukács, the two founders of Western Marxism. They too argue that the real is ultimately historical and that truth is "a thing of this world." And like Latour they are anxious to avoid scientism while preserving science from the wreckage of the traditional notion of truth. Of course there are big differences, but the common historicism is striking. Gramsci called this pre-post-modern view "absolute historicism," and this is a suggestive description of Lukács's early Marxist theory as well.

In the remainder of this paper I will compare the understanding of truth and reality in the writings of Gramsci, Lukács and the early Marx. Their position has other precedents in the history of philosophy I will discuss in the concluding sections of this paper.<sup>5</sup>

Both Gramsci and Lukács were influenced by contemporary versions of idealist philosophy, Gramsci by the neo-Hegelian Croce and Lukács by the neo-Kantians, Rickert and Lask.<sup>6</sup> These thinkers distinguished meaning from existence. They did not deny the independent existence of reality, but they also claimed that we can have no notion of that reality apart from some humanly instituted meaning. Natural science does not transcend this limitation. It cannot give access to "things in themselves." This approach has interesting consequences for Marxism, while the idealist premise is also transformed in contact with historical materialism.

What makes Gramsci's historicism absolute is the inclusion of science in the history of culture, the "superstructures" in his Marxist vocabulary. Where scientism claims that culture is an effect of natural causes, absolute historicism reverses the direction of influence and interprets nature through the history of culture. The fact that historical research is not firmly grounded in quantitative measurement and experiment does not disqualify it as a valid form of knowledge. It has its own methodological foundation: dialectics, itself relative to a historical situation.

Historicism often supports skepticism, the view that no beliefs are actually true because all are relative to the particular circumstances of their birth. Gramsci does indeed argue that knowing subjects belong to a certain historical moment and can therefore only understand the world through the hegemonic culture prevailing in that moment. But he pushes historicism to its ultimate limit. At that limit historicism ceases to be relativistic. He argues that it is the idea of an unattainable model of perfect knowledge that devalues human knowledge. Relativism presupposes a true reality known to God but hidden from man. If it makes no sense to postulate a reality and a truth beyond culture, then our knowledge is not essentially defective simply because it is culturally inflected. The very definition of truth should be reconsidered if the traditional one has no application at all. I call this view "epistemological atheism."

Here is Gramsci:

It might seem that there can exist an extra-historical and extra-human objectivity.

---

<sup>5</sup> For a contemporary version inspired by Kuhn and Foucault rather than Gramsci and Lukács, see Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas Nemeth, *Gramsci's Philosophy: A Critical Study* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980); Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Lukács, Marx and the Frankfurt School*. (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

But who is the judge of such objectivity? Who is able to put himself in this kind of ‘standpoint of the cosmos in itself’ and what could such a standpoint mean? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a hangover of the concept of God.... We know reality only in relation to man, and since man is historical becoming, knowledge and reality are also becoming and so is objectivity.<sup>7</sup>

Gramsci argues accordingly that the idea of a “reality in itself,” apart from any connection to man, makes no sense. The rejection of the notion of a wholly independent reality makes it possible to transcend the dilemma of scientism and relativism. It has a parallel in Lukács, to which I will get in what follows.

In sum, knowledge is a social phenomenon, part of what Gramsci calls “a *historical bloc* in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form.” Gramsci notes that the distinction is “didactic,” artificial, since the material level of the bloc could not exist without its corresponding ideology, and ideology without a material basis would be mere individual fantasy.<sup>8</sup> By this he means that societies are held together by a hegemonic culture which is also the basis of knowledge. It is true that many customary beliefs and prejudices must be discarded in the pursuit of knowledge, but the knower, the scientist for example, necessarily shares deep assumptions with his or her time, assumptions that open the mind to a significant aspect of reality. Knowledge is thus not an immediate relation of mind to reality, but arises from and reflects the culture. Society is implicated in knowledge on the basis of its productive relation to nature—“the material forces.”

Gramsci’s historical materialism thus underlies his epistemology. But the matter he invokes is not identical to the nature posited by the natural sciences. Rather, it is the matter actually engaged in the process of production, that is, nature as experienced through the mediation of labor and technology. He writes,

Clearly, for the philosophy of praxis, ‘matter’ should be understood neither in the meaning that it has acquired in natural science... nor in any of the meanings one finds in the various materialistic metaphysics. The various physical (chemical, mechanical, etc.) properties of matter... should be considered, but only to the extent that they become a productive ‘economic element.’ Matter as such therefore is not our subject but how it is socially and historically organized for production, and natural science should be seen correspondingly as essentially a historical category, a human relation.<sup>9</sup>

He goes on to dismiss attempts to explain history with the natural scientific concept of causality. This has consequences for the understanding of the results of scientific inquiry. Where scientism interprets those results as ontologically fundamental, and as independent of the process of their construction, Gramsci insists on their historical contingency.

What does this mean for Pasteur? Had Gramsci considered Latour’s argument, he would have said that the problem is not whether yeast existed before it was known, but rather the “ideological” character of the terms on which it is known. Knowledge does not give direct access to a thing-in-itself that already possesses the meanings we attribute to

---

<sup>7</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith, eds. and trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 445-446.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 465-466.

it. Of course the ferment existed but it did not exist *qua* ferment, and was not so described. Our concept of “lactic acid ferment” belongs to a historical sequence in which these creatures, or at least their effects, were described and understood in different ways at different times, and that sequence is not finished but may lead on to yet further understandings, further designations.<sup>10</sup>

It adds nothing and is confusing to claim that reality already had the meaning we give to it today before we gave it that meaning and—this is the critical point—independent of our relation to it. To reject this confusion is in no way to claim that we created the reality we know by granting it a meaning. It is to acknowledge that the meaning we grant may well be superseded in the future and that therefore no meaning can pretend to describe an ultimate reality independent of humanity. Talk of such a reality as anything more than the occasion for knowledge and action is strictly speaking meaningless.

What would ‘objectivity’ be without the activity of man, creator of all values including those of science? A chaos, that is to say, nothing, the void, supposing one could say so, because in reality, if one imagines that man does not exist one cannot imagine thought and language. For the philosophy of praxis, being cannot be disconnected from thought, man from nature, activity from matter, subject from object; if one makes this distinction, one falls into one of the many forms of religion or meaningless abstraction.<sup>11</sup>

Gramsci attempts to sum up his position in an example that raises further questions. He notes that the terms “East” and “West” are arbitrary conventions and, furthermore, that these terms are attributed to parts of the globe in accordance with an imperialist logic. “Yet these references are real; they correspond to real facts, they allow one to travel by land and by sea, . . . to understand the objectivity of the external world. Rational and real become one.”<sup>12</sup> The terms on which reality is known refer to real entities but the terms themselves are culturally relative.

Does the reality of the “real facts” in this example qualify them as in some sense human-independent despite Gramsci’s earlier rejection of any such thing? In that case he would be advocating a rough version of the position Hans Radder calls “referential realism,” according to which “we can say of terms in scientific propositions *that* they refer to elements in a human-independent reality, but not that these propositions describe reality as it is in itself. . . . This kind of realism implies reference but not correspondence, picturing, reflection, representation, or something like that.”<sup>13</sup> It is impossible to be sure if this is what Gramsci intended. His language is imprecise, but at least we can get an idea of the positions between which he oscillates.

The problem stems from the ambiguity of the concept of the object and the corresponding concept of objectivity. On the one hand, there is what we might call the “contemplative” sense of the term taken for granted by common sense: the objective world

---

<sup>10</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 446-448. Latour’s account of the historical “relative existence” of entities posited by science is found in his *Pandora’s Hope*, 155-156.

<sup>11</sup> Antonio Gramsci, “La Scienza e le Ideologie ‘Scientifiche,’” *Il Materialismo Storico* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1966), 55-56 (my translation). The passage is translated slightly differently in Antonio Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, D. Boothman, ed. and trans. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 292.

<sup>12</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 447-448.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Radder, *The Material Realization of Science* (Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London: Springer, 2012), 93.

consists in everything that could in principle be an object of detached observation. Objectivity in that sense signifies a reality independent of human beings. Clearly, this concept of objectivity is not “wrong,” but it is limited. It is in this sense that Gramsci and, as we will see, Lukács and Marx acknowledge the independence of reality. But this concept of “objectivity” is often associated with scientific naturalism which they would not accept because it excludes another, more fundamental, concept of objectivity. That second concept refers to objects insofar as they play a role in human practices. Their “objectivity” is essentially bound up with a subject. Objects in this “practical” sense have two aspects that distinguish them from “contemplative” objects: their meanings are related to possible actions, and as such they belong essentially to history. Absolute historicism considers this concept of objectivity fundamental.<sup>14</sup>

Objectivity in this practical sense plays a central role in Gramsci’s political theory. Human action in society is governed by institutional rules, some of which are rooted in the structure of the production system. These rules are comprehended through the prevailing common sense which grants meaning to action and its objects. Common sense itself reflects a specific hegemonic worldview, successfully imposed through the dominant cultural institutions. But this is not a stable configuration where the given meanings contradict the realities of the actors’ life. We can call these realities, the actor’s “facticity,” the particular way in which the actor lives his or her circumstances. For example, the proletariat experiences the sale of labor power as an alienation whereas it is signified in capitalist society as a commercial transaction. In fact it really *is* a commercial transaction. The capitalist form is no illusion. But this transaction is experienced differently by the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The conflict between meaning and experience creates an opening for an alternative worldview that can eventually become hegemonic and motivate a revolution.

This concept of practical objectivity is persuasive in its political application but it appears to justify relativism since so many different views contend and “reality” as described by any one of them is no longer a usable measure of truth. The question is not just which one to believe, but whether to believe anything at all since no final test of truth seems to exist once knowledge is totally enclosed by culture. Gramsci has an answer to this skeptical conclusion.

Ultimately, he argues, knowledge is fractured into opposing beliefs because the human race is itself divided. Overcoming those divisions in the domain of knowledge is not easy; it requires serious research. To some extent, this has already been achieved by natural science, but social knowledge remains contested under the influence of conflicting class cultures. Gramsci writes, “Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race *historically* unified in a single unified cultural system.”<sup>15</sup> The condition for such universal agreement is an end to the divisions within the human community that cause so much disagreement. That in turn will require an end to the most basic social division, the division between classes. Thus the triumph of the revolution will not only change laws and economic arrangements. It will also establish the epistemological

---

<sup>14</sup> Esteve Morera’s careful study of Gramsci’s philosophy affirms his basic realism. The argument is convincing but incomplete since it does not engage with the difference between what I call contemplative objectivity and practical objectivity. Esteve Morera, *Gramsci's Historicism: A Realist Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 1990)

<sup>15</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks.*, 445.

conditions of true knowledge.

This brief survey of Gramsci's absolute historicism shows how he would have answered Cheney. Political and military power do not get to the foundation of the real. Neither the truth nor the social relativity of knowledge are to be found at that level. The real foundation is not specific facts, which power can of course create. Rather, it is the state of our ability to control nature, the material base, addressed in labor and language in accordance with a stage in human history.<sup>16</sup> That depends in turn on knowledge acquired through experience and experiment. The evidence that progress has been made is clear from the technical superiority of modern science and technology. Progress is not the result of imperial fiat but of a combination of social and economic developments and cognitive and technological achievements far beyond the power of any state.

### ***Lukács's Theory of Reification***

I will turn now to Lukács's version of absolute historicism. He would certainly have agreed with Gramsci's remarks on objectivity, but he has a more elaborate theory of social "form." Recall that Gramsci says that knowledge belongs to a "historic bloc" of which ideology is the form. By "form" Gramsci means particular beliefs and worldviews which shape society as the hegemonic common sense. Lukács's concept of form refers not to the content of belief but to the formal structure of consciousness that underlies that content.

Lukács call this a "form of objectivity," in keeping with his neo-Kantian background. The neo-Kantians argued that knowledge presupposes the construction of objects in accordance with certain fundamental logical principles. These principles put order into our perception of the world. Objectivity is thus constituted rather than immediately given. Lukács historicized this notion, defining cognitive epochs, each with its own form of objectivity, corresponding to the Marxist periodization of modes of production.

Karl Mannheim will later call such a historicized form of objectivity a "total conception of ideology," a universal perspective on the world rather than a specific content of belief.<sup>17</sup> Such perspectives resemble Kant's universal preconditions of the possibility of experience, although they are social and multiple rather than singular and transcendental. Gillian Rose explains: "The status of the precondition [of objectivity] becomes ambiguous: it is an *a priori*, that is, not empirical, for it is the basis of the possibility of experience. But a 'sociological *a priori* is, *ex hypothesi*, external to the mind, and hence appears to acquire the status of a natural object or cause."<sup>18</sup>

We are familiar with this notion in the simplified version known as cultural relativism. Presumably, each culture has its own perspective on the real which can be summed up in certain principles applied unconsciously to the objects of perception. One famous version of cultural relativism is the so-called "Whorfian hypothesis" according to which each language determines a particular worldview. Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions argued for the existence of distinct "worlds" corresponding to epochs in the history of science. Medieval and modern science were shown to be "incommensurable." As a Marx-

---

<sup>16</sup> Note that this pragmatic criterion of cognitive advance, which Lukács shares, measures the relative technical capacities of civilizations rather than the more or less accurate picturing of an independent reality.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, L. Wirth and E. Shils, trans. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936), 57.

<sup>18</sup> Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 14.

ist, Lukács applied something like Kuhn's theory to the “worlds” created by changing modes of production.

Lukács argues that the apriori “form” of capitalism is shaped by what Marx called “commodity fetishism.” Capitalism is unique among social formations in assigning a price to all available goods, quantifying social reality. He calls the result “reification,” from the Latin root “res” for thing. The commodity society is “reified” in the sense that it presents itself as a vast collection of things subject to laws, the laws of the economy. Note that the concept of “thing” to which Lukács refers in his concept of reification is not entity in general but rather entities which retain an identity as they change and engage in causal interactions. These are the entities that modern science has learned to analyze in terms of facts and laws.

Reification becomes the general form in which objects are perceived by the members of a capitalist society. But when everything is perceived in terms of its thing-like characteristics, other dimensions are obscured. These other dimensions include the human relations underlying the institutional realities of the society and the potentialities of social development. These are not “facts” and so are excluded from the reigning social sciences.

The reified mode of perception drives the individuals to perform the actions that reproduce the system. The stock market is a good example of this dynamic: the investor acts as an individual on the stock market, predicting future values in terms of the “laws” of the economy, but it is the multiplication of such individual acts that generates those laws and those future values. While the market looks like a “thing,” and is considered as such by economics, in reality it is the systematic consequence of human actions.

Escape from the reified logic of the system is possible, Lukács argues, for the social class which is forced by its everyday circumstances to see the human reality behind the veil of reified appearances. That class is the proletariat which can dereify the society starting out from the gap it perceives between its own reified form as wage labor and the life process of which that form is only an aspect. Here is a social thing that defies its thing-like character.

Lukács writes of the proletariat, “The quantitative differences in exploitation which appeared to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence.”<sup>19</sup> This realization makes it possible for the workers to combine their forces in a social movement to overcome reification. Marxism is the translation of this realization into a method of social analysis that gets behind the reified appearances to the human reality underlying them.

The theory of reification has implications for the concept of objectivity. Like Gramsci, Lukács argues against both scientism and relativism. The relativist must invoke an absolute which devalues the merely human perspective, whether it be God or nature. In every case the relativity of human thought presupposes a sphere of being that is not relative but that is fixed and eternal. Lukács calls this the “systematic place” of being.

In a passage that resembles Gramsci’s critique of the God’s eye view of reality, he argues that,

It is only meaningful to speak of relativism where an ‘absolute’ is in some sense assumed. The weakness and the half-heartedness of such ‘daring thinkers’ as Nietzsche or Spengler is that their relativism only abolishes the absolute in appear-

---

<sup>19</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, R. Livingstone, trans. (Cambridge: MIT, 1971)

ance. For, from the standpoint of both logic and method, the ‘systematic place’ of the absolute is to be found just where the apparent movement stops. The absolute is nothing but the fixation of thought, it is the projection into myth of the intellectual failure to understand reality concretely as a historical process.<sup>20</sup>

Nature as understood by the natural sciences is privileged as the systematic place under capitalism. Nietzsche, for example, understands human life from the standpoint of biological concepts of sickness and health, or so Lukács implies. Like Gramsci, Lukács rejects mechanical materialism and the scientism associated with it.

The identification of the results of scientific inquiry with the thing in itself, independent of human beings, is a vestige of theology that presupposes a view from nowhere. Science does not have immediate access to nature, but is a social institution and encounters nature through social forms and processes. Lukács writes that objectivity is achieved in “the real historical interaction of objective and subjective moments of development...in its living interaction.”<sup>21</sup> This is Lukács’s equivalent of Gramsci’s “historical bloc.” It is the actual experienced world as the site of the interaction of human beings and nature, rather than a pure theoretical representation such as science provides. As the basis on which such representations can be constructed it is ontologically fundamental.

Gramsci could not read Lukács’s work but he seems to have heard rumors that Lukács was a dualist who opposed nature to society. In one passage Lukács denied that nature exhibited the principal features of the dialectic, which he described as the unity of theory and practice, subject and object. In another passage Lukács acknowledges the existence of an objective dialectic of nature lacking these features.<sup>22</sup> But he also claims that “Nature is a societal category.”<sup>23</sup> These apparently contradictory affirmations have given rise to much confusion.

I think the undialectical nature to which Lukács refers in the first passage is the nature of natural science, while the ontologically significant nature for Lukács, as for Gramsci, belongs to history and is the object of labor rather than science. That nature, with which human beings are in “living interaction,” is implicated in the unity of theory and practice, subject and object. To be sure, the natural objects of labor are independent of human beings, but Lukács seems to believe they are so only in the sense that their practical relations to humans are contingent. As meaningful, the objects belong to experience in principle, if not in practice at any given time and place. The case is different for human beings; they are never independent of nature both because they are natural beings and because they must appropriate nature to be. From the standpoint of the total process engaging human beings and nature, nature participates in the dialectic of theory and prac-

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>21</sup> Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, E. Leslie, trans. (London: Verso, 2000), 101.

<sup>22</sup> Gramsci’s remark is found in Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 448. Lukács’s two apparently contrary positions are found in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 24 n6 and 207. For his distinction between the two natures, see Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 129-130. See also Andrew Feenberg, “Democracy, Epistemology, Ontology, Methodology” in *Critical Theory and the Thought of Andrew Feenberg*, D. Arnold and A. Michel, eds., (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017), 303-313; and Konstantinos Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács’s Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 213-218.

<sup>23</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 234.

tice, subject and object.<sup>24</sup>

But there is a deeper sense in which the nature encountered in labor differs from scientific nature. Lukács has little to say about nature in *History and Class Consciousness*, but he tries to make up for the lacuna in his *Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, written in response to early criticism from within the communist movement.<sup>25</sup> In this text Lukács explains that nature as an object of labor belongs to history as the ultimate source of the forms of knowledge. The social dialectic encompasses the nature of the labor process and is determined by it. There is no dualism of nature and history, but rather two different ways of viewing nature, a detached view (science) and an engaged view (history).

This clarifies Lukács's confusing statements on the dialectics of nature. Hegel's *Science of Logic* contains two principal divisions: the objective and the subjective logic. The objective logic is an explanation of the various aspects of thinghood, the various ways in which objects present themselves as such. Lukács argues that nature is dialectical in this objective sense insofar as it is an object of "contemplation," that is, in abstraction from the subject that perceives it. This is its status *for natural science*. The subjective logic is based on the model of life, its relations to the world and to itself. Life as a dialectical theme is not contemplated but lived. The subject is not simply a spectator on things but is engaged essentially with them. The main concern of *History and Class Consciousness* is the social world as a product of human action, hence the subjective logic applies to society, but not to nature considered as an object of natural science. But insofar as natural science is a social phenomenon, it too is incorporated into the subjective logic of society.

But can scientific knowledge be reconciled with this absolute historicist account? This is a serious issue for Lukács. His theory of reification attributed a general form of objectivity to society under capitalism. That society appears to its members as a collection of quantifiable facts. But quantifiable facts are precisely the way in which the natural sciences understand reality.<sup>26</sup> Are the sciences merely capitalist ideology? Even Gramsci, who locates the natural sciences in the superstructures, concedes that they have a special status because they are also a force of production. How to reconcile these two roles with each other and with absolute historicism?

Lukács distinguishes history and (scientific) nature by their relation to human action.

---

<sup>24</sup> Does Adorno's emphasis on the "priority of the object" contradict absolute historicism? The "non-identity" of subject and object does not reinstitute naïve realism or the Kantian thing-in-itself. Adorno writes, "That the object takes precedence even though indirect itself does not cut off the subject-object dialectics" (Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton, trans. (New York: Seabury, 1973), 186). Both Brian O'Connor and Deborah Cook agree that the non-identical is a feature of experience, not something beyond experience. See Brian O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of a Critical Rationality* (Cambridge, MA / London: MIT Press, 2004), 63; Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd, 2011), 40. This is already explicit in the tension Lukács notes between working class experience and the category of wage labor, which can be read as an instance of non-identity. See Andrew Feenberg "Why Students of the Frankfurt School Will Have to Read Lukács," *Handbook for Critical Theory*, M. Thompson, ed. (London: Palgrave, 2016), 117-121.

<sup>25</sup> Georg Lukács, *A Defence of 'History and Class Consciousness': Tailism and the Dialectic*, translated by Esther Leslie, London: Verso, 2000). I discuss the relevance of this text to the question of dialectics in Andrew Feenberg, "Fracchia and Burkett on *Tailism and the Dialectic*: A Response," *Historical Materialism*, Volume 23, Issue 2, 2015, pp. 228–238.

<sup>26</sup> Surprisingly, Ian Hacking makes a similar argument, attributing the rise of modern science to the generalization of economic exchange. Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 13.

He argues that the reification of social facts can be overcome by a revolutionary social movement. But that movement cannot overthrow science as though it were a political or economic institution. He writes, “When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>27</sup> Why? Because unlike wage labor, nature is not an appearance veiling a structure of human action. Human action presupposes the nature on which it works, it does not create it. It creates institutions; it does not create stars and planets.

But stars and planets belong to history in a different way, through the cultural conditions of our knowledge of them. Capitalism opens a perspective on nature which makes modern science possible, but that same perspective obscures the dependence of social relations on action. This is a methodological distinction between nature and society in contrast with an ontological distinction that would divide being into two incommensurable aspects. True, science posits timeless laws independent of humanity. But science itself belongs to history through its apriori, its reified presupposition.

As a historical phenomenon, science cannot claim to produce an accurate picture of things-in-themselves and its validity does not depend on such a claim. As forms of objectivity change in history, so do the scientific “pictures” of reality. But science is not arbitrary. It validates its truths methodically at each stage, if within a cultural framework which, in modern times, is the reified form of objectivity of capitalist society. But here a historical asymmetry appears: all epochs are not equally close to God, to paraphrase Ranke. Like Gramsci, Lukács argues that modern science represents a progressive development, evident in its increased power over nature. This is a sort of pragmatic criterion, not of methods or truths—Gramsci and Lukács have no intention of telling scientists how to do their job—but of forms of objectivity which support more or less successful knowledge systems.

This notion of progress is rooted in the progressive character of reification itself. Reification reflects a social world that has recognized itself as such, that does not attribute its origin to a divine source. This is the great cognitive advance made possible by capitalism. It demystifies nature as well as society and reduces thinghood in general to a stripped down vestige of the mythological conceptions prevailing in premodern societies. This liberation of nature from the irrational makes modern science possible, just as the parallel liberation of society from social myths ushers in democracy and ultimately socialism.

However, the process is more complex in the latter case because the aim is itself more complex. Where science seeks to understand the way nature works, its lawful order, social knowledge also informs human action, enabling the individuals to modify reified social relations, the rules of their own collective behavior. This is quite different from technical action on nature which obeys the laws rather than modifying them. Dereification is thus an inherent potential of a reified society, a potential that is only fully actualized under socialism.

Lukács draws an astonishing conclusion from his argument for the sociality of knowledge. All knowledge is culturally conditioned in so far as it depends on a form of objectivity that opens a perspective on the world. Normally, these forms go unchallenged as absolute presuppositions of knowledge. The middle ages made great strides in the ad-

---

<sup>27</sup> Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 10.

vancement of knowledge of nature, all the while believing that nature was designed by God for a purpose. Modern science arose in conjunction with early capitalism, and the machine formed its model of reality. Neither medieval nor modern scientists contested their own implicit idea of nature, which served as the basis of their discoveries.

According to Lukács, when the proletariat overthrows the reified form of objectivity, it changes the general relation of knowledge to culture. In class society,

Truth could only achieve an 'objectivity' relative to the standpoint of the individual classes and the objective realities corresponding to it. But as soon as mankind has clearly understood and hence restructured the foundations of its existence truth acquires a wholly novel aspect. When theory and practice are united it becomes possible to change reality and when this happens the absolute and its 'relativistic' counterpart will have played their historical role for the last time.<sup>28</sup>

The term "reality" in this passage refers to the fundamental social relations that produce the institutions of the society. These relations condition the forms of knowledge possible at the given stage of social evolution. Under capitalism the reified form of objectivity both opens ways of knowing and closes off awareness of "reality" in this sense. When this reality becomes the object of conscious choice, as the proletariat dereifies society, the form of objectivity is no longer beyond question. Reflection no longer meets an obstacle at the threshold of knowledge but is limitless. Yet this does not devalue knowledge but reveals it as the human product it has always been. To be sure, the content of knowledge is not an arbitrary human creation; rather, the framework within which knowledge is constructed is social in nature. This is what Lukács means by his claim that the absolute and its correlated relative are finally transcended. In more familiar terms, he is saying that culture loses its quasi-natural character and becomes an object of knowledge and practice.

Is this where Cheney wins the imaginary argument with Latour with which we began? Perhaps not with armies but with television broadcasting and Internet trolls? Surely those with power today have the power to create culture for the rest of us. Has Lukács given weapons to his enemies as Latour's modernist complains? Not so fast. On Lukács's terms the media managers can create particular cultural objects only by reproducing the reified structure of the cultural system as a whole. Domination through technical control is inscribed in that system and it is reproduced through cultural manipulation on the media. The one thing the dominant can never do is eliminate their own technical relation to their subordinates. This is not evidence of ill will on their part; that relation is quite simply the only way they know how to get things done from their position in society. Thus reification—the ultimate basis of capitalist culture—is reproduced by the culture industry, whatever the content of its productions.

Lukács's argument is a version of Marx's notion of socialism as human control of history. For Lukács history is essentially a succession of cultural forms: "*history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the forms of objectivity that shape the life of man.*"<sup>29</sup> Hence human control of history requires cultural self-reflection. It cannot be arbitrary because it must always start out from the existing cultural forms, which allow only limited possibilities of transformation.

In socialism as Lukács imagined it, cultural self-reflection is a process of dereifica-

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 186, trans. modified, italics in original.

tion leading to an ever more fluid relation between the members of society and the institutional frameworks within which they live. Unfortunately, he has little to say about socialism as human control of culture. There is only one passage which hints at its nature.

The world which confronts man in theory and in practice exhibits a kind of objectivity which—if properly thought out and understood—need never stick fast in an immediacy similar to that of forms found earlier on. This objectivity must accordingly be comprehensible as a constant factor mediating between past and future and it must be possible to demonstrate that it is everywhere the product of man and of the development of society.<sup>30</sup>

An original concept of socialism can be developed out of this passage, but that is a subject for another paper.<sup>31</sup>

### *Marcuse's Marx*

Can these unusual interpretations of Marxism find support in Marx's work? Most Marxists draw on Engels' *Anti-Duhring* and its Soviet successors for their philosophical views. It is significant that both Gramsci and Lukács criticized Bukharin's, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*. This early Soviet textbook in Marxist philosophy advocates technological determinism and mechanical materialism, the unfortunate heritage of Engels, crudely interpreted. Gramsci and Lukács have much more sophisticated philosophical positions elaborated in dialogue with the most advanced philosophy of their times. But this raises the suspicion that they are not really Marxists.

Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 offers the strongest support for their claim to be doing Marxist philosophy, but it was not available to them. This is a puzzling text which has itself been excluded from the properly Marxian corpus by the Althusserians and "orthodox" Marxists. They object to the emphasis the *Manuscripts* place on alienation and what they consider a metaphysical humanism incompatible with materialism and the scientific world-view.

Indeed, Alfred Schmidt finds a "hidden nature speculation" in the *Manuscripts*. Marx writes that "Nature is the inorganic body of man."<sup>32</sup> Taken literally, Marx's claim implies a teleological metaphysics in which nature, conceived as a superorganism, mediates itself by creating human consciousness. The distinction between history and nature is obliterated as in Marx's remarkable claim that "*society* is the accomplished union of man with nature, the veritable resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature."<sup>33</sup> This claim supports the rejection of the existing natural sciences which depend on an unhistorical concept of nature. "Natural science will have to abandon its abstract materialist, or rather idealist, orientation."<sup>34</sup> In its place Marx promises a new science which unites nature and history. By contrast, the usual materialist view holds that human beings stand in contingent causal relations to nature and have no role in nature's ontological constitution.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>31</sup> I have discussed this issue in Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 112-119,

<sup>32</sup> Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, B. Fowkes, trans. (London: New Left Books, 1971), 79-80. Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, T. B. Bottomore, trans. and ed. (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 126-127.

<sup>33</sup> Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 157.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 164.

Marx's concept of nature as the inorganic body of humanity certainly sounds like metaphysics, but most commentators take it as a suggestive metaphor. From that standpoint the remark seems to anticipate contemporary eco-philosophy, as does the later Marx's notion of a "metabolism" of man and nature. In Marx these concepts refer to the unity of nature and history in terms of the natural conditions of social life, particularly in agriculture, and the introduction of historical considerations into natural science, for example, evolutionary theory and thermodynamics. Current Marxist authors interpret the unity of nature and history as ecological science.<sup>35</sup> This is the objective side of the early Marx's rather more radical conception of the unity of history and nature.

The metaphysical interpretation arises from a fundamental ambiguity in Marx's text. He repeatedly states that the human being is a natural being associated with real, natural objects. This seems to conform with the standard materialist view: humans are no more than things among things. But he also describes the relation between the human being and its "sensuous" objects as one of unity, even ontological interdependence. In some passages he attributes a world-constituting power to human labor. Such notions derive from idealism, not the materialism seemingly invoked in the frequent references to the objectivity of man and nature. The attributes of nature belonging to this second description are incompatible with the first description, and indeed suggest the peculiar metaphysics Schmidt detects and most Marxists would reject, if taken literally, as incompatible with materialism. Yet Marx claims to be a materialist of a new kind. Clearly, he must have in mind concepts of sensuousness and objectivity different from the usual ones, but what are those concepts?

After Kant and Hegel, mechanical materialism and naïve realism are no longer credible philosophical positions. But how then to avoid idealistic metaphysics? In 1844 Marx thought he had the answer but he soon judged his attempt a failure and never published the *Manuscripts*. Neither Feuerbach nor Hegel provided Marx with the concepts he would have required to transcend the opposition of materialism and idealism. His position of 1844 persists in his later work, expressed in a more or less objectivistic language. For example, he continues to play with the notion of nature as the inorganic body of man, although it seems clear that now the expression is metaphorical.<sup>36</sup> Only later were the conceptual resources available to "save" his original insight from the ambiguous and confusing language in which he first expressed it. That finally proves possible in the context of philosophical currents that inspired the absolute historicists. We will therefore need to draw on the early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical background.

No doubt had Gramsci and Lukács access to the *Manuscripts*, they would have grounded their absolute historicism in it, interpreted under these influences. The limited role nature plays in their version of Marxism could be supplemented by Marx's early work. In the event, the task fell to Marcuse, shortly after the *Manuscripts* were published in 1932. His interpretation depends on the historical relativity of meaning he found in Dilthey, neo-Kantianism, Heidegger and phenomenology. We only get hints of a solution from Marcuse, but those hints can be supplemented by explicit reference to phenomenology. That is how I will proceed in what follows.

Admittedly, the connection to this background is not explicit in Marcuse's discussion

---

<sup>35</sup> See John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010.)

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*. Martin Nicholas trans. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1973), 474, 488.

of the *Manuscripts*, but it helps to understand his idiosyncratic interpretation. In any case, when he read the *Manuscripts*, he was ready for them, although by this time he had for the most part dropped explicit reference to Heidegger and phenomenology. In fact, Marcuse would later date his break with Heidegger from his encounter with this early Marxian text. But the break was not complete because Marcuse gained insights through his study of phenomenology that persist in one form or another to the end. Those insights show up in his interpretation of Hegel and Marx.

Specifically, Marcuse distinguishes meaning from existence along lines similar to Gramsci and Lukács. On this basis he distinguishes the nature of natural science from what he calls the concept of “‘nature’ in the wider sense given to this concept by Marx [in the *Manuscripts*], as also by Hegel.”<sup>37</sup> It is not entirely clear what Marcuse means by the “wider sense” of nature. Presumably he is referring to nature insofar as it is implicated in human activity. This, at least, is what Marx means by nature in the *Manuscripts*: “Not only man emerges in history, but also nature, in so far as it is not something external to and separated from the human essence but belongs to the transcended and appropriated objectivity of man: ‘world history’ is ‘the emergence of nature for man.’”<sup>38</sup>

By distinguishing two senses of nature Marcuse finesses the conflict between Marx’s early critique of the “abstract” natural sciences and his later acceptance of their validity. He can echo the *Manuscripts*’ thesis of the unity of history and nature along lines familiar from Gramsci and Lukács without endorsing Marx’s negative critique of science. The “wider” nature is foundational for Marcuse as it is for the early Marx, but he quietly ignores Marx’s own call for a new science.

The central argument of the *Manuscripts* concerns the nature of man. Marcuse insists that the human being is essentially historical: “We are no longer dealing with an abstract human essence, which remains equally valid at every stage of concrete history, but with an essence which can be defined in *history* and *only* in history.”<sup>39</sup> As Marx defines it, this historically inflected essence has three main characteristics: species-being, sensuousness and objectification. Together these characteristics explain an original concept of world-constitution which Marcuse attributes to Marx. I will next comment on this complex of concepts, leaving aside many other interesting aspects of Marcuse’s interpretation of the *Manuscripts*.

1. *Species-being: objectivity encountered through meaning.* The concept of “species-being” is often taken to mean that human beings are cooperative and depend on society for their full development. This is true enough, but it is not the main point of Marcuse’s peculiar interpretation. Rather, the human being is characterized by what Marcuse calls, in the original German, “*die Sich-verhalten-Können zum ‘Algemeinen’ der Gegenstände.*” The English translation states that the human being has the ability to “relate” to beings through their “species,” their “general aspects,” their meaning. This reveals possibilities which go beyond their immediate state. Things have potentialities signified in their concept which they may fail to realize, as in the famous example of Aristotle’s definition of “man” as a “rational animal.” Human freedom is based on this ability which the

---

<sup>37</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism,” in, *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit, (Lincoln and London: University Nebraska Press, 2005), 97

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 102. See also Marcuse, “On the Concept of Labor in Economics,” 139.

<sup>39</sup> Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism,” 105-106.

German text identifies as a mode of comportment, an essential power.<sup>40</sup> That power is realized in labor.

2. *Sensuousness: correlation of need and satisfaction.* The *Manuscripts* place a great emphasis on the “sensuousness” of the human being in contrast with the idealist concept of man as essentially mind. Exactly what this means is unclear. It is often interpreted on common sense terms to mean that human beings are things in the world in a causal relation to matter through the sense organs. Although Marcuse repeats Marx’s insistence that “man” is an “objective natural being,” he is at pains to distinguish the concept of “sensuousness” from such common sense materialism. He claims that the sensuous relation to objects is not causal but rather refers to the concept of receptivity in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.

In Kant the senses are the receptive faculty; they receive the given in experience which is then structured by the mind. This is a passive relation Marx expands to include needs, which he calls “ontological affirmations of being (of nature).”<sup>41</sup> Whatever Marx originally meant by this proposition, in Marcuse’s quasi-Kantian interpretation it must refer to some sort of necessary correlation between needs and the means of satisfaction.

Experience in Kant is structured by transcendental categories which we can loosely describe as mental. Consider causality for example, which Kant considers such a transcendental category. Although the mind cannot determine cause-effect relations a priori, it will always find them correlated in the experience of empirical objects. Every empirical event has a cause and this is a necessary relation, whatever that cause might be. Just as in Kant the categories of the mind are also found in experience, so concrete needs and satisfactions must be the empirical form of correlated meanings. The ontological interpretation of needs binds them to their objects in an essential unity. This unity cannot be understood in the trivial sense that human beings are natural beings. How then can it be understood? Marx’s answer is “objectification.”

3. *Objectification: becoming human through labor.* The category of “objectification” central to this approach is another ambiguous concept which, like species-being and sensuousness Marcuse interprets in an unusual way. The power to construct general concepts and the passive relation to being in need come together in labor, the active transformation of nature in accordance with its potentialities. Labor consists in “objectifying” human being in nature by which is meant the creation of a world reflecting human needs and capacities. Objectification in this sense is obvious in every domestic interior: the height of door knobs and furniture reflects (“objectifies”) the size of the implied occupants just as the heating and lighting correspond to their senses and physiological needs. And Marx goes on to argue that it is through such objectifications that human beings develop and gain possession of their own full capacities.

4. *World-constitution: becoming “real” through objectification.* In his first book on Hegel, Marcuse interprets this dual process in terms of Hegel’s ontological concept of life. His interpretation of Hegel is influenced by Dilthey for whom the individual and the milieu stand in essential relations. This idea was developed by other German thinkers in

---

<sup>40</sup> Herbert Marcuse “Neue Quellen zur Grundlegung des Historischen Materialismus,” in *Der Deutsche Künstlerroman, Frühe Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 522. Herbert Marcuse, “On the Concept of Labor in Economics,” in *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit, (Lincoln and London: University Nebraska Press, 2005), 96.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, ed. and trans. T. Bottomore (London: C.A. Watts, 1963), 189.

the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its influence on Heidegger is apparent in his concept of “world.” Marcuse interprets Hegel’s concept of life along these lines. The living subject and its environment are united in a world. Life is a process of appropriation and transformation of nature and self. “Self-consciousness had recognized that the world constituted only the cycle of its activity....It recognized that actuality is in essence an object of work.”<sup>42</sup> This is work as world-constituting.

Objectification is not merely a contingent causal relation between separate substances, but rather, actualizes the object, grants it its appropriate form. This is the sense of Marcuse’s reference to Hegel for whom the “actual” is not immediate but results from the labor of the Concept, here reinterpreted as labor in the Marxian sense. “It is man’s ‘need’ – as already interpreted above – for objects alien to him, ‘overpowering’ and ‘not part of his being’, to which he must relate *as if* they were external objects, although *they only become real objects through and for him.*”<sup>43</sup> Implied in this remark is the notion that raw materials are not merely there for the taking but suffer a kind of ontological privation until they achieve full reality, “actuality” in Hegel’s sense, through labor. The human power to identify the universal in things, i.e., their potentialities, makes possible their incorporation into a world where they can become what they truly are.

Furthermore, while objectification yields products corresponding to human needs, it does more than that, it transforms “reality” itself. Marx writes that “It is only when objective reality everywhere becomes for man in society the reality of human faculties, human reality, and thus the reality of his own faculties, that all *objects* become for him the *objectification of himself.*”<sup>44</sup> Marcuse interprets this to mean that “the objective world is thus understood in its totality as a ‘social’ world...and thus as human objectification.”<sup>45</sup>

As world-constituting objectification goes beyond simply fulfilling needs. In the critique of Hegel that concludes the *Manuscripts*, Marcuse finds evidence for a broad sense of objectification. He writes, “The history of man thus occurs and fulfills itself as objectification. The reality of man consists in ‘bringing out’ [*Herausschaffen*] all his ‘species powers’ in real objects, ‘the positing [*Setzung*] of a real...objective world’.”<sup>46</sup> Marcuse goes on to argue that all the various spheres of existence addressed in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, morality, the state, the economy, are such “objective worlds.” Here the narrow boundaries usually ascribed to labor are clearly transcended.

But this is not subjective idealism. Like Gramsci finding his way between East and West in the real world, Marcuse, and Marx in his interpretation, conceive meaning as access to the real.<sup>47</sup> The real in this context is nature as it is experienced and transformed, not what the early Marx calls the “abstract” nature of natural science. This lived nature is objective, but it belongs to human history, as do human needs and the labor which satisfies them. In this context meaning is not an alternative to praxis but arises from it. Practi-

---

<sup>42</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, S. Benhabib, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 276.

<sup>43</sup> Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism,” 112, my italics. Over 30 years later, Marcuse repeats this argument in the new preface to *Reason and Revolution*: “For to comprehend reality means to comprehend what things really are, and this in turn means rejecting their mere factuality.” Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1963), ix.

<sup>44</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 160-161.

<sup>45</sup> Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism,” 102.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 118, (translation modified.)

<sup>47</sup> This is what in actor-network theory might be called a “material-semiotics.”

cal activity structures a reality articulated by thought.<sup>48</sup> This is the sense in which Marx's *Manuscripts* overcome the opposition of materialism and idealism.

Marx, as Marcuse understands him, thus affirms the implication of human being in being as such. The entry of objects into history through practice is no mere accident of their being but realizes them most fully, enables them to "*become real objects*." The meaning of what it is to be an object now includes a quasi-teleology in accordance with which objects are destined to become "real" through incorporation into a human world.<sup>49</sup>

Marcuse concludes,

In this freedom man reproduces 'the whole of nature', and through transformation and appropriation furthers it, along with his own life, even when this production does not satisfy an immediate need. Thus the history of human life is at the same time essentially the history of man's objective world and of 'the whole of nature' ('nature' in the wider sense given to this concept by Marx, as also by Hegel). Man is not in nature; nature is not the external world into which he first has to come out of his own inwardness. Man is nature. Nature is his 'expression', 'his work and his reality'.<sup>50</sup>

### ***The Theory of Natural Praxis***

This brief account of Marcuse's interpretation of the *Manuscripts* shows how he intends to "save" Marx from metaphysics. Marx's early work could then supply a foundation for absolute historicism. Does he succeed? The introduction of a teleological concept of "reality" leaves room for doubt, but I do not believe Marcuse's Hegelianism would allow a regression to a traditional Aristotelian concept of being. Something else must be involved and that something I contend is the answer to the question I posed early in the previous section: what does Marx mean by "objectivity" that allows him to claim, *as a materialist of a new kind*, that labor is world-constituting? There is a way of understanding this daring concept that makes sense of Marcuse's interpretation. In brief, I will argue that Marx's first thesis on Feuerbach holds the key to Marcuse's account of the *Manuscripts* and indeed to the philosophy of praxis in general. Here is that key: "The chief defect of all previous materialism... is that the object, actuality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the *object or perception* [*Anschauung*], but not as *sensuous human activity, practice* [*Praxis*], not subjectively."<sup>51</sup> I contend that this thesis already anticipates the phenomenological standpoint that underlies Marcuse's interpretation of the

---

<sup>48</sup> The mature Marx offers a version of this early theory of meaning that is compatible with ordinary empiricism, and yet the reference to praxis persists and harks back to the more radical early view. See Karl Marx, *Texts on Method*, (London: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 190-191.

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger analyzes this quasi-teleological conception in his lectures on Aristotle's metaphysics. See Martin Heidegger and Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnke. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). I discuss this aspect of Heidegger's thought in Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (London: Routledge, 2005), chapter 2.

<sup>50</sup> Marcuse, "New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism," 97.

<sup>51</sup> Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, L. Easton and K. Guddat, trans. and eds. (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 400. "The German Ideology," often interpreted as Marx's rejection of the *Manuscripts*, contains passages such as the following: "the sensuous world [is] the total living sensuous *activity* of the individuals composing it." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology," in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, L. Easton and K. Guddat, trans. and eds. (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 419.

*Manuscripts.*

There is an intriguing mention of Marcuse in Heidegger's conversations in *Le Thor* that contains an echo of Marx's thesis.<sup>52</sup> Heidegger notes that production is defining for the "world" in Marx, and further, that production is a type of praxis. "Reversing Hegel's idealism in his own way, Marx requires that being be given precedence over consciousness. Since there is no consciousness in *Being and Time*, one could believe that there is something Heideggerian to be read here [in Marx]! At least Marcuse had understood *Being and Time* in this way."<sup>53</sup> Heidegger implies that this is an error, but *Being and Time* describes the human relation to the world as fundamentally practical. Perhaps Marcuse was not wrong to find a deep connection between aspects of Heidegger's early work and Marx.

Heidegger's concept of "world" links Marcuse's interpretation of the *Manuscripts* to Heidegger. Recall that "world" is exemplified in *Being and Time* as a workshop consisting of tools that "refer" to each other and ultimately to a Dasein, in this case a carpenter. "World" in this sense is a scene of practical activity. Outside a context of use, the individual tools in the workshop can be considered as "things" independent of each other, but this is not the way they are experienced by the carpenter who engages with them practically at work. The work addresses each tool in its relation to other tools and to the workshop as a whole. Hammers, nails, boards, all belong together. This is what Heidegger calls the system of references. Dasein's "care," or concern for its own future being, gives the system a purpose. Dasein enters its own future and establishes its identity not alone but with all the "equipment" [*Zeug*] it requires in its forward movement through time. This apparently subjective concept Heidegger treats as the original, ontologically fundamental "opening" or revelation of meaning.

Heidegger's concept of meaning is phenomenological. It depends on a first person viewpoint on experience to reveal relations obscured by common sense objectivism. As Marx argues in his first thesis, praxis must not be reduced to the encounter of objective things but considered "subjectively." But to get beyond the simple affirmation of a first person standpoint on experience requires a concept of meaning first developed at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in neo-Kantianism and phenomenology.

Heidegger's innovation is to treat meaning and the recognition of meaning as primarily practical. Meanings are not just in the mind but are "enacted;" they inhabit human action and define the objects of action as well. Practice does not depend on theoretical knowledge for access to meaning but has its own kind of "sight."<sup>54</sup> An "enacted" meaning is one which is lived in experience rather than formulated explicitly. When one sits in a chair, one enacts the meaning "chair" although it is unnecessary to conceive that meaning consciously to perform the operation. Sitting on a chair involves recognition of a mean-

---

<sup>52</sup> Two points must be made with respect to Heidegger. Only Heidegger's early phenomenological work enters the discussion here, not his later critique of technology often interpreted as an appeal for a more "authentic" relation to nature. Heidegger's phenomenology has been treated as a coded version of his repugnant anti-Semitism and Nazism, but it would be more accurate to reverse the equation: Heidegger's political interpretation of his own early work is only one possible reading. There are others, including Marcuse's Marxist appropriation.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, trans. A. Mitchell and F. Raffoul. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 52.

<sup>54</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 98.

ing–chairs are “for” sitting. Books stacked on a chair cannot experience this “for” but are simply obstructed in their downward movement under the force of gravity. Nothing about this distinction implies either the unreality of chairs or the subjectivity of the meaning, “chair.” Subject and object are united in the practical relation of meanings, but since these meanings are enacted, real “sensuous” objects are implicated in human practices. The connection is not merely ideal, in the mind, but is played out in concrete relations to objects as they are experienced in practice. Marx would have approved.

Heidegger understands objective knowledge as the result of de-worlding entities in order to reveal aspects not specifically engaged by Dasein’s care. The hammer and nails of the earlier example need not be conceived exclusively as belonging to the world of the workshop but can also be taken out of context and considered in terms of their properties as things with a specific weight, color, origin, etc. This distinction allows Heidegger to accept the validity of the existing natural sciences which study de-worlded things, while denying that science grounds worlds, the original scene on which “being” is “revealed.” The primordial ontological relation is a unified “being-in-the-world.”

Marcuse’s essay on labor seems to follow this approach without formulating it explicitly. Although published after the essay on the *Manuscripts*, it appears to have been written earlier, when Heidegger’s influence was more pronounced. That influence is clear in propositions such as this: “Human praxis is labor on and in the present through the transformative ‘sublation’ of the past with anticipatory care for the future.”<sup>55</sup> But as a Marxist Marcuse rejected the dependence of Heidegger’s theory on a universalized individual, Dasein, and its abstract care for its own identity. In other early essays published while he was still studying with Heidegger, he argued instead that worlds are differentiated by the class status of human subjects and are rooted in the mode of production.<sup>56</sup> And he found a more concrete version of “care” in Marx’s concept of need. But he still granted the ontological priority of the practical relation to reality as a system of meanings corresponding to the concerns of subjects, a “world” in something like Heidegger’s sense. In this Marxist revision of phenomenology, the unity of subject and object is mediated by labor which itself is understood as enacting meanings. “What happens to objects worked on and obtained through labor does not take place in the dimension of ‘nature,’ ‘materiality,’ etc., but in the dimension of human history.”<sup>57</sup>

Marcuse follows Heidegger in finding the original source of this approach in Dilthey. In *Being and Time* Heidegger lays down the principles of his own version of absolute historicism in a brief critical section on Dilthey. The essential point is the unity of the “ontical” and the historical. By this Heidegger means that things must be explained *essentially* in terms of a historical ontology, rather than isolated in a separate domain, nature, indifferent to history.<sup>58</sup> Marcuse shares Heidegger’s appreciation of Dilthey. He argues that Dilthey’s concept of cultural objectification as a system of meanings anticipates the ontological concept of historicity. Marcuse writes that for Dilthey, “Life is an interaction complex (*Wirkungszusammenhang*) which is essentially determined by the category of

---

<sup>55</sup> Marcuse, “On the Concept of Labor in Economics,” 141.

<sup>56</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism,” in *Heideggerian Marxism*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> Marcuse, “On the Concept of Labor in Economics,” 139.

<sup>58</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 455.

‘meaning’ (*Bedeutung*).”<sup>59</sup>

The most radical application of this approach in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was due to the animal ethologist Jacob von Uexküll. Uexküll argued that each animal species “interpreted” the nature surrounding it in terms of its needs, isolating a species-specific “*Umwelt*” from the objectively given environment. Each such world might be conceived as a niche carved out of the objective nature in terms of specific attributions of meaning: this is food, that is danger, and so on. The phenomenological concept of world developed in Heidegger’s early work drew explicitly on this concept, enriching it through a phenomenological interpretation of the human world.<sup>60</sup>

Extrapolating from Marcuse’s interpretation of the *Manuscripts*, one can make sense of Marx’s ontology on these phenomenological terms, or as Marx himself writes in his first thesis, “subjectively.” Marcuse himself does not formulate this account explicitly, but I see no other way to interpret his suggestion that Marx’s concept of sensuousness be understood on Kantian terms. Sensuousness would not be mere immediacy but would be informed by concepts, meanings. Sensuousness on these terms would be a “*natural praxis*—a much larger concept of human praxis that encompasses human activity as a whole, that is, the life of the senses.”<sup>61</sup>

Consider for example hunger and food. In what sense are they *essentially* related as Marx would claim? Certainly not as ordinary things in the world. But food, as a category under which certain objects are understood, is essentially related to hunger as the corresponding category under which human beings appropriate what is understood as food. The two categories stand in essential relations conceptually. That in itself is not remarkable, but consider the significance of their practical enactment. Of course we would ordinarily say that any given steak or potato is only accidentally related to the person who makes a meal of it. And to be sure, hunger and food are two separate things in the ordinary sense of the term “thing.” But phenomenologically considered, in their lived practical relation, they are not things in that sense. Rather, they are enacted *meanings* that require each other to be intelligible. As enacted they are more than concepts and less than things as objectivistically understood; they are moments in a practice, “sensuous human activity,” *implicated materially* in each other’s being.<sup>62</sup>

Marx comes close to saying something like this explicitly. He writes that “The *senses* have, therefore, become directly theoreticians in practice.” And he goes on:

The cultivation of the five sense is the work of all previous history. Sense which is subservient to crude needs has only a restricted meaning. For a starving man the human form of food does not exist, but only its abstract character as food.... Thus, the objectification of the human essence, both theoretically and practically, is necessary in order to *humanize* man’s senses, and also to create the *human senses* corre-

---

<sup>59</sup> Herbert Marcuse, “Der Problem der geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit,” in *Herbert Marcuse: Der deutsche Künstlerroman Frühe Aufsätze*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 480 (my translation). A partial French translation of this important text is available in Gérard Raulet, *Herbert Marcuse: Philosophie de l’Emancipation* (Paris: PUF, 1992), 99-102.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William A. MacNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>61</sup> Foster, Clark and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 230.

<sup>62</sup> Merleau-Ponty writes that “In the proletariat, class consciousness is not a state of mind or a knowledge...because it is a praxis, that is to say less than a subject and more than an object.” (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les Aventures de La Dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 66.

sponding to all the wealth of human and natural being.<sup>63</sup>

The implication of this and similar passages is that sensuousness is not a simple causal interaction with stimuli in the environment but an encounter with meaningful entities.

This suggests a non-deterministic way of understanding the relationship of consciousness to being. Marxists usually argue that material circumstances determine thought causally, a claim Marx himself makes on occasion. But a dialectical relation seems to be implied by the emphasis on meaningful activity in the *Manuscripts*, and that relation is reflected in later texts such as “The German Ideology” where Marx writes: “Conceiving, thinking, and the intellectual relationships of men appear here as the direct result of their material behavior.... Consciousness can never be anything else except conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process.”<sup>64</sup> Thus it is not the material circumstances that are decisive but “material behavior,” and as we have seen the object, the “objective world” is itself the result of objectifying practice.<sup>65</sup> The bifurcation of meaning into subject and object, thought and things, is based on this prior unity.

The unity at the level of enacted meaning does not cancel the contingency of any particular encounter of the human being with the real, nor does the role of meaning cancel material existence. On the contrary, meaning is the medium in which the human being first encounters material existence. It is, furthermore, against the background of their general meaning that the particularities of objects appear. This is evident in the subject-predicate form of the sentence which attaches a contingent characteristic to the thing itself.

The meaning of practical objects is not in the mind any more than the meaning of contemplative objects is independent of history. The practical object is there to touch and see. Considered in terms of actual experience, its meaning is not a subjective projection of the mind but the aspect of its reality revealed by the practice which engages it. This is what makes technology possible as the material crystallization of an enacted meaning. The instruments of production are not simply instruments; they are the realization in a technical design of a previously lived relation of meaning. Technology “fixes” the relation and stabilizes both the human and the material side. Design plays a normative role, informing users and shaping their understanding and behavior in terms of a definite notion of what is at issue practically. Thus an assembly line does not just organize work, it defines work and determines the identity of the worker as such. Similarly, the carpenter’s tools in Heidegger’s example define a very different kind of work and identity.<sup>66</sup>

Insofar as science is a historically situated enterprise, its objects are not fundamentally different; their meaning is relative to the practical research procedures which engage them. But from the standpoint of science itself, its objects are facts, shorn of the weight of the procedures of discovery, free from the history that made them. Technology too can be viewed from an objectivistic angle, obscuring its original relation to meaning and social choice. The two standpoints, historical and factual co-exist. The factual standpoint

---

<sup>63</sup> Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 160-162

<sup>64</sup> Marx and Engels, “The German Ideology,” 414.

<sup>65</sup> Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism,” 102.

<sup>66</sup> This is the basis of the critical constructivist philosophy of technology I have developed in several books. See, for example, Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology* (New York: Oxford, 2002). For the relation between my approach and STS, see Andrew Feenberg, *Technosystem: The Social Life of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), chapter 2.

has its uses. It is the basis for scientific truth claims which abstract from the messy process of discovery. Technology is codified in technical disciplines useful for further work and repair, again abstracted from the social background. In this case what is lost in the abstraction is socially and politically significant. Under capitalism, the factual standpoint is privileged. Marxism, like STS, dereifies the objects that present themselves factually to expose them to evaluation and criticism.

The worst sort of confusion arises from the assumption that meaning is subjective except in its scientific-technical applications which alone reveal reality as it is in itself. This ignores the fact that scientists' picture of reality changes frequently, a fact of which they are fully aware, even as the general public and many epistemologists pretend that science has finally captured the real in its naked truth. Once that assumption is discarded, absolute historicism makes sense both in its claims for a historical ontology and its respect for the natural sciences.

### ***The Finite Horizon***

Like Gramsci, Marx dismisses as meaningless any attempt to think ultimate reality in abstraction from human being, as in the idea of creation. I call this a "finite horizon" of being and knowledge. It characterizes many thinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger and Foucault. These thinkers agree with Gramsci and Lukács that knowledge evolves in history and is never final. This view of often associated with relativism which takes the fallibility of human knowledge as evidence that a finite subject cannot know ultimate reality. The standpoint of a finite horizon rejects this relativistic conclusion and argues that reality is not a thing-in-itself inaccessible to a finite subject. Rather, knowledge at every stage gives access to reality under a definite aspect.

Perhaps the clearest formulation of this view is Nietzsche's "perspectivism," according to which there is no ultimate reality beyond finite human knowledge and no God to know it.

Let us, from now on, be on our guard against the hallowed philosophers' myth of a "pure, will-less, painless, timeless knower"; let us beware of the tentacles of such contradictory notions as "pure reason," "absolute knowledge," "absolute intelligence." All these concepts presuppose an eye such as no living being can imagine, an eye required to have no direction, to abrogate its active and interpretive powers—precisely those powers that alone make of seeing, seeing something. All seeing is essentially perspective and so is all knowing.<sup>67</sup>

The concept of the thing-in-itself is mixed up with the question of the existence of the external world. Some would argue that a view like Nietzsche's dissolves reality into subjective beliefs; only a reality distinct from knowledge would be truly real. But by definition such a reality would be unknowable. As we have seen the absolute historicists would not agree. Their arguments are complicated but I think there is a simple way of making their essential point.

Why would one suppose that the external world must be a thing of some sort independent of our knowledge of it to exist at all? This is an inference from a common sense analogy. We believe that various perspectives on a material object refer to that object itself, beyond any particular perspective. By analogy we might conclude that the perspec-

---

<sup>67</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Genealogy of Morals," in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, F. Golffing, trans. (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 255.

tives on reality represented by different interpretations of it, different knowledges, refer to a thing-in-itself that lies beyond any one interpretation. The analogy fails because the material object shares a meaning and qualities with its perspectives, whereas the thing-in-itself shares nothing at all with the knowledges from which it is abstracted. The material object is a meaningful entity. The thing-in-itself is strictly meaningless, without qualities of any kind and so appears to the philosophers who advocate a finite horizon of knowledge as nonsense. Certainly, the analogy does not hold. Reality is not comparable to a thing.

The standpoint of the finite horizon identifies the external world with our potential knowledge of it. The external world is known in each historical period by the knowledge available at the time. It is not something other than what can be effectively known. The historical development of ideas proves only the contingency of knowledge, not the existence of an unknowable ground of knowledge. As Gramsci puts it, "Science does not lay down any form of metaphysical 'unknowable,' but reduces what humanity does not know to an empirical 'not knowledge' which does not exclude the possibility of its being known" in the future.<sup>68</sup>

Marx's version of the finite horizon is expressed in a remarkable paragraph that reads like a Zen *koan*.

If you ask a question about the creation of nature and man you abstract from nature and man. You suppose them non-existent and you want me to demonstrate that they exist. I reply: give up your abstraction and at the same time you abandon your question. Or else, if you want to maintain your abstraction, be consistent, and if you think of man and natures as non-existent, think of yourself too as non-existent, for you are also man and nature. Do not think, do not ask me any questions, for as soon as you think and ask questions your abstraction from the existence of nature and man becomes meaningless.<sup>69</sup>

A similar idea is expressed in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The idea of an "absolute subject" is dismissed as a "residue of Christian theology" and therewith of any access to the real apart from that of Dasein.<sup>70</sup> But Dasein has access to the real only through the meanings granted by *das Man*, that is, by culture. Hence the notion of a reality "in itself" is meaningless as strictly nothing can be said about it.<sup>71</sup>

Here is Heidegger's more theoretically rigorous version of Marx's formulation of the finite horizon of thought and being. "The independence of things at hand from humans is not altered by the fact that this very independence as such is possible only if humans exist. The being in themselves of things not only becomes unexplainable without the existence of humans, it becomes utterly meaningless; but this does not mean that the things themselves are dependent upon humans."<sup>72</sup> And he too has a *koan*: "When Dasein does not exist, 'independence' 'is' not either, nor 'is' the 'in-itself.' In such a case this sort of thing can be neither understood nor not understood...*In such a case* it cannot be said that

---

<sup>68</sup> Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 292.

<sup>69</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. and ed. Tom B. Bottomore, (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 166.

<sup>70</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 272.

<sup>71</sup> I follow the interpretation offered by Herman Philipse, "Heidegger's 'Scandal of Philosophy': The Problem of the *Ding an Sich* in *Being and Time*," in *Transcendental Heidegger*, S. Crowell and J. Malpas, eds. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007), 169-198.

<sup>72</sup> Heidegger and Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, 173-174.

entities are, nor can it be said that they are not.”<sup>73</sup>

Gramsci and Lukács each present variants of the finite horizon. As I have shown, they affirm the historical nature of being. History itself is ultimately based on the form of the interaction in production of human beings with nature. Marcuse finds this notion in the *Manuscripts* and imports Lukács’s concept of reification into his account of it. Reality “is” in Heidegger’s sense only relative to the cultural meanings that emerge from human interaction, and these meanings themselves change over time. But so long as reality “is,” that is so long as it is encountered in history with the meanings that prevail at the time, it has the independence from human beings required by a non-relativistic concept of truth.

Abstract from human participation in that all-encompassing concept of history and there is nothing left to “say,” no meaningful way of signifying the “things-in-themselves” that so troubled Kant. Like Marx, Gramsci and Lukács could object to those who seek a reality “in itself,” “Do not think, do not ask me any questions, for as soon as you think and ask questions your abstraction from the existence of nature and man becomes meaningless.”

### **Conclusion**

Gramsci and Lukács historicize science under a finite horizon without falling into skeptical relativism or reducing it to power. The fact that they are Marxists links this approach to political action. They anticipated the coming of a radically different social world in which truth would be a “thing of this world” not just in theory but in practice as well.<sup>74</sup>

A coherent version of their historicist position can be summed up in four basic propositions:

1. scientific knowledge reflects a limited standpoint on reality, hence no naturalism or scientism;
2. experience gives the only access to the real through culturally specific meanings;
3. human being is therefore implicated in ontology;
4. the progressive development of human being and knowledge of reality is evidenced by the growth of technical control over natural processes.

The discussion of these propositions in the preceding pages makes it clear that the question of reality with which this paper began is more complicated than the imperialist Vice President imagined. STS scholars would certainly agree. Latour argues that a phenomenon such as Pasteur’s ferment is constructed by the whole network of objects and procedures through which it is discovered. Even after the discovery, it cannot subsist independent of the network. It continues to rely on the activities which made it real in the first place as it is reproduced across space and time. The network stands in the place of the transcendental conditions Gramsci and Lukács locate in the historical bloc or the form of objectivity.

But this does not mean that “anything goes” as adversaries in the science wars contended. Latour, no more than Gramsci and Lukács, intends to strip method and care from the construction of knowledge. The work of construction takes skills that, as the example

---

<sup>73</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 255. The original passage is found in Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), 212.

<sup>74</sup> I develop this concept in Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, chapter 3.

of Pasteur shows, have nothing to do with force.<sup>75</sup> Human action is implicated in the construction of reality, but not simply through the exercise of political or military power. There are many types of action and that of empires and their armies is not alone, nor even pre-eminent, in transforming the world. In the long run creativity and knowledge play a greater role.<sup>76</sup> Marxism acknowledges another sphere of action in which creativity and knowledge find their roots: “the production and reproduction of real life.” That sphere creates worlds; it is more fundamental than empire. The notion that knowledge-making is a worldly activity is the great insight Gramsci, Lukács and Marx attempted to validate in their absolute historicism as an alternative to scientism and relativism.

---

<sup>75</sup> Where Latour's concept of science departs from these predecessors is in his explicit rejection of the universality of conceptual reference, reducing it to its conditions of construction much as Marxism reduces social institutions to underlying social processes. Whether this radical dereification of science is successful is in dispute. See Hans Radder, *The world Observed / The World Conceived* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 145-153.

<sup>76</sup> For a time Heidegger blurred the distinction, comparing state action to artistic production as world-constituting *technai* but he quickly retreated from the comparison. His later work gives up on any human-historical intervention into being.